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NEW YORK TIMES
3 MAY 1980

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U.S. Had Plan for Strafing Teheran in Rescue Mission

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 2 — The United States plan for rescuing the hostages in Teheran included an option for calling in C-130 gunships that would have used flares to light up the American Embassy area and then strafe any Iranian troops moving toward the area, Government officials said today.

At the same time the officials said the Administration had been prepared to use the Navy's most advanced combat plane, the F-14 Tomcat to attack Iranian fighters attempting to interfere with the mission.

The general plans for using air power during the embassy raid were disclosed earlier this week. The officials provided new details today on military options that were open to President Carter. They stressed that the heavily armed gunship version of the C-130 and the fighters would have been ordered into action only in the event the 90-member assault team ran into trouble.

The gunships are equipped with advanced radar and infrared night detection equipment as well as an array of weaponry, including 20-millimeter Gatling guns, 40-millimeter Bofors cannons and a 105-millimeter howitzer.

Large Air Support Operation

The officials added that as part of the tactics of assuring the presence of aircraft near Teheran during the assault, the planners provided for large-scale air operations over and near Iran, involving two aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea, airborne warning-and-control-system aircraft and Air Force KC-135 tanker planes dispatched from Oman and other bases in the Persian Gulf region.

According to aides involved in planning the operation, a small number of C-130 gunships would have flown to Teheran on the night of the embassy raid. The planes,

they said, would have gone in low to avoid radar, much as the six C-130's reached the desert refueling site southeast of Teheran before the mission was canceled.

Fighters in Air Near Teheran

Simultaneously, F-14's and A-7 Corsair attack aircraft from the carriers Nimitz and Coral Sea would have been sent aloft, the officials said, and refueled in flight by tanker planes. The fighters were to have headed toward Teheran and would have arrived in the vicinity about the time the attack on the embassy was starting.

Like the C-130's the fighters would have relied on low-altitude flight, evasive maneuvers and electronic countermeasures to escape detection. According to one official, the Navy had been launching fighters at night and sending them toward the Iranian coast for several weeks before the mission. These feints, as the aide described them, were intended to accustom Iranian and Soviet monitors to American air activity.

Iran's Military Radio Monitored

A crucial aspect of the option for using air power, according to the account, was the ability of American intelligence to eavesdrop on Iranian military communications. The officials added that American commandos on the ground were assigned the task of repelling any civilians groups that approached the embassy grounds after being alerted to the rescue operation.

The officials said that American forces would have been able to intercept any messages ordering Iranian troops to the embassy compound and that within seconds the C-130's could have been sent to the area. Using high-intensity flares that would have created almost daylight conditions, the officials said, the gunships would have been able to destroy any Iranian forces moving toward the compound, including tanks.

They said that if the American commanders learned that Iranian fighter planes had been alerted, the Navy's F-14's could have flown to the scene swiftly. An aide said that it was the expectation of some senior officers that the F-14's would have been able to destroy any alerted Iranian fighters while they were preparing for takeoff.

Commenting on the overall size of the air mission, which would have required several back-up fighters and tankers, an official acknowledged that the risks of accidents, including collisions and crashes, was high. "But when you undertake these kinds of operations, you've got to be prepared to run risks," he said.

In discussing the decision to call off the mission at the desert refueling base, Pentagon officials continued to assert that there had been no disagreement among the commanders on the scene over the decision once it was learned that only five of six remaining helicopters was operable. But they divulged that a debate erupted between Col. Charlie A. Beckwith of the Army, the commando leader, and other officers at the desert site shortly after the six helicopters landed.

The officers said that two of the six helicopter pilots, who had flown through severe sandstorms, were exhausted and ill and there were questions whether they could continue. Colonel Beckwith, the officials said, strongly urged that the operation be continued and his advice was followed by Col. James Kyle of the Air Force, commander at the desert site.

Some officials suggested that after one of the helicopters sliced into a C-130, Colonel Beckwith quarreled with Colonel Kyle's decision to evacuate the refueling site swiftly without pausing to destroy the five intact helicopters being abandoned. A Pentagon spokesman strongly denied this report, saying that the helicopters had not been destroyed because of the perils from the burning and exploding ammunition-laden C-130.